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Read Houston Mayor John Whitmire's full inauguration speech

By **Elizabeth Sander**, **Yilun Cheng**, *Staff writers*

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Ailyn Perez, and Dylan Zhong, 9, are shown during the City of Houston Inauguration Day event held at the Wortham Center Tuesday, Jan. 2, 2024, in Houston. Perez, a soprano with the Houston Grand Opera, sang the National Anthem. Zhong, an honor student at WoodCreek Elementary, lead the Pledge of Allegiance.
Melissa Phillip/Staff Photographer

Houston Mayor John Whitmire delivered his inaugural speech on Tuesday, highlighting issues from public safety to crumbling infrastructure to affordable housing. A transcript of his speech can be found below. It has been lightly edited for clarity.

If I can manage a city half as well as I picked out the program today, we'll be in great shape. The program was designed to show the amazing diversity and talent of the city of Houston. Where else in America would you have a justice of the peace – the

people's court – swear in the mayor of the fourth largest city?

Judge Victor Trevino comes from a long line of public servants who have helped make Houston the great city that it is. Everyone should be smiling this morning because the people of Houston are smiling, because they've elected a mayor who is going to listen to them, a mayor who is known for solving problems. And that's why it's exciting to be here today.

I have individuals I'd like to thank. I could use all my allotted time if I went through the list – Houstonians who have been so nice and generous to me during the campaign. I want to thank the council members and our city controller for their willingness to be public servants. I know the sacrifices that you give, what it does to your family. But I applaud your willingness to serve and the diversity on council. We're going to come together and make a real difference.

The only reason I ran was to make a difference. That's the reason I'm here this morning, to make a difference, to make this great city greater.

Obviously, I must thank my two daughters. They have been reared by their mother and a father who's been in public office their whole lives – not just their adult lives – since they were born. It's been such a blessing. And I've got more plaques and awards than I can place on the wall, but my greatest accomplishment that I'm most proud of is two productive young ladies who are making contributions on their own – Sarah and Whitney Whitmire. So proud.

During the campaign, at campaign forums, I'd get very passionate about my love for this city. I went to high school here, then the University of Houston. I've had the honor of representing constituents here for 51 years. I get very passionate, and I'd often say, "I can't wait. I wish I could go to work in the morning." Well, ladies and gentlemen, it's morning time, so let's get started.

We have a great city and great people. I could spend the whole program talking about our greatness. The nation will be coming here next week for the national championship. They will highlight Houston. They'll talk about our great med center, our port, our space port, our sports teams. And then they're going to talk about our people.

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We're recognized worldwide as the most diverse city, probably in the world. It's something that we're all so proud of. I do want us to practice that diversity. As Michael Gott sang, we are all one. We have our unique neighborhoods, our nations of origin, our customs, our religions, our sexual orientations, but I present the opportunity to lead this city as one.

When I was approached by Houstonians to run for mayor, they said, 'Whitmire, you can unite this city,' and that's what I intend to do."

Now, like most major cities, we have our challenges. I could spend the morning listing them: public safety, infrastructure, city services that could be better, city financial issues that we can no longer kick down the road to address, the homeless issue. When you leave this beautiful building, go a block, turn right, go a block and you'll see homeless people. The city has done a good job, but we must do better. The homeless deserve our attention, and we've got to address that. It involves criminal justice and mental health. We have to prioritize it.

Affordability. It's the goal of Houstonians to own homes. We cannot waste our resources at the housing authority or the housing department. We've got to reach out. I applaud our justices of the peace in the county who now are helping folks have legal representation before they're evicted.

Infrastructure. We've got to be creative. We've got to partner with the county, which we will. I'm already in discussions with commissioners who are willing to work in their precinct and share the costs for city streets. We must do more with Metro. We can ask Metro to partner with us to improve the streets that their buses tear up.

There are so many other things that we can do, but my number one priority and the priority of Houstonians is public safety. If we do not address public safety, the other quality of life issues will not matter. I want you to know that Houstonians are

concerned, and the first solution to solving the problem is acknowledging you have one. And I know what the stats say. I know they're heading in the right direction from last year, but one year's stats does not explain the fullness of the problem.

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Of course, we've got to increase the number of officers on the street. I'll commit myself to recruiting. We have officers in Austin and Seattle who have contacted me and are willing to transfer to Houston. We've got to make HPD open its doors to other officers from other agencies.

We make it so difficult for people to join HPD. We have cadets that are required to purchase a revolver. A service revolver costs \$1,000. After we recruit someone, and they move to Houston, they have to finance the cost of that revolver. That's their introduction to the department. I will get the police foundation and others to give them that revolver.

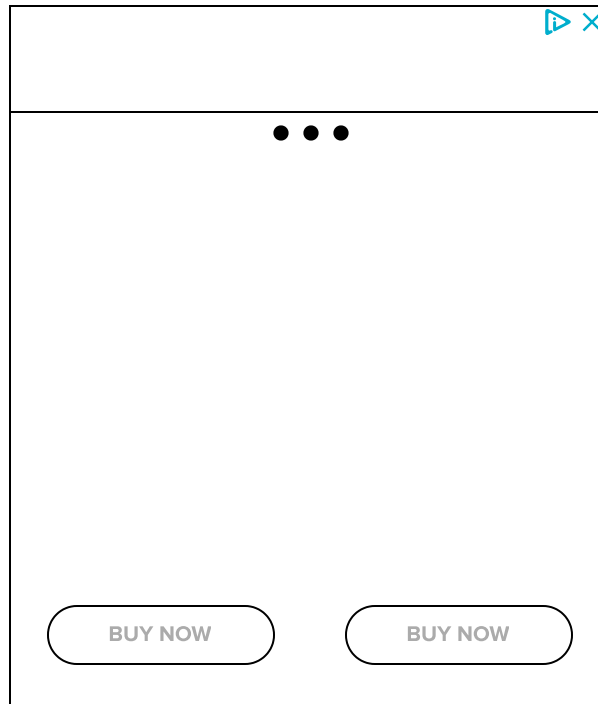
And public safety also means firemen. I will meet with the firemen tomorrow to begin negotiations to get them and the city out of court. It can be done. It must be done. You do not sue your first responders in John Whitmire's administration.

We will work with our judges. I will be very outspoken. The backlog has been reduced, but this morning there are 1,900 people waiting to go to court for murder or capital murder charges, to be held accountable or found innocent. The problem is half of them are either on bond or fugitives; 900 are on the streets of Houston. That's a small group that is raising havoc that you see on the 10 o'clock news. We've got to address that.

We've got to have reliable garbage picked up. Mine's been in front of my house for a week. I thought surely, surely. But that's the reality. And we live in a great city. Great cities do not have those issues.

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We're not going to kick the can down the road. We're going to handle the finances. We're going to reach across the aisle. We're going to be very creative in working with the county.

We're gonna reach across the aisle and work with Austin. Houston can get greater resources at the land commissioner office under my leadership because Dawn Buckingham, a former Senate colleague, has already said let's sit down and improve relationships.

County officials have great responsibility. We have friends there. But I want to remind the county that we're in Harris County this morning. The old model for county services and the sheriff's office starting at the city limits of Houston is backdated to Squatty Lyons' days, if any of you remember Squatty Lyons.

So back to public safety. The first thing I did after I was sworn in at 12:01, because I didn't waste any time, was ride with Chief Finner. I wanted our first responders to know that I care, and Houstonians care. I was representing Houstonians in saying "Thank you, first responders, for putting your life on the line."

They are already improving their production -- you can see it in their eyes. They want to work for Mayor Whitmire, and Houston will benefit from that. Our firefighters too. When I made a call with Chief Finner, firefighters were there. And don't forget our municipal employees. Thank you municipal employees who keep our offices going.

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Back to public safety – collaboration. We have 80 plus agencies in the city of Houston. They don't talk to each other. They can't even talk to each other on police radios. So Chief Finner is already showing leadership that I respect and like and encourage. On Thursday morning at 10 o'clock, he's already having a meeting. And he and I will meet with other law enforcement agencies to divide the city and see that no community is going unprotected. That's what leadership is about. And that's what I and this council will provide for you.

We can't do it alone. We need the support of Houstonians. Everywhere I go now people say, "How can I help you?" You can help us by supporting us, giving us your

ideas. I want to listen to the citizens of Houston. I will be on the first floor of City Hall today at two o'clock to meet and greet, listen and learn what people's concerns are.

One of them actually called my son-in-law this morning. The city of Houston, as a courtesy, told him that he used four times as much water in December as he did in November. They just want him to know he has got a \$1,000 water bill. People need to know where to go.

Flooding – that comes under infrastructure. And it's not only preparation for Harvey, but also having sufficient first responders, a recovery czar and other people in place. I want to address with council the drainage because there hasn't been enough maintenance to the drainage system. You know it, I know it. You know what thoroughfares you can't travel. That has to be corrected. But we have to do it together.

We're all public servants. Each and every one of you who can hear my voice – whether you're on the ballot or not. You're a public servant. Whether you're on the ballot or not. And I think someday we're going to be judged: What did you do with your public service?

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We need you at the city of Houston, your support, your prayers. And like I said, there is much to do. I have no patience, no time to waste. I'm willing to give the next eight years, of the remaining best years of my life, to public service on behalf of the city of Houston. So let me just say in closing, it's time for us to go to work.

Thank y'all. Let's go to work.

Jan 2, 2024



By **Elizabeth Sander**



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Elizabeth spent the first year of her fellowship at the San Antonio Express-News, covering education and breaking news. She is a graduate of Columbia University's School of Journalism and Tufts University.

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Yilun studied political science as an undergrad at the University of California, Berkeley and as a grad student at Columbia University. She later earned her master's in journalism from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. Before coming to Houston, she covered immigration policies and marginalized communities for the Columbus Dispatch.

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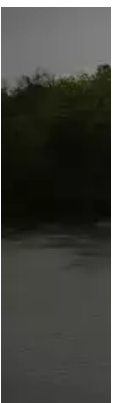
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